

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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BALD EAGLE, THE NATIONAL SYMBOL, IS ENDANGERED IN 43 STATES

The bald eagle, symbol of the Nation, is being officially listed as endangered by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service over most of the country.

Lynn A. Greenwalt, director of the Interior Department agency, said the effect of the formal listing, which will appear in the February 14 Federal Register, will be to give the magnificent bird protection against any Federal action or funding that would adversely modify its remaining habitat.

The listing covers 43 of the 48 adjoining United States, but not Alaska, where the bald eagle has a thriving population, or Hawaii, which has no bald eagles. The remaining 5 States, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Oregon and Washington, have bald eagle populations which are in somewhat better condition than in the other States; in those 5 States, the bird is being listed as threatened.

"Endangered" means that a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. "Threatened" means that a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a portion of its range.

Many people believe the bald eagle was already listed as endangered. The species is protected by the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940, but only the southern subspecies was listed under the Endangered Species Act. For the convenience of wildlife managers, bald eagle subspecies had been arbitrarily separated with 40 degrees north latitude dividing the northern and southern breeding populations. However, this distinction was unclear. On that 40 degree line, which roughly separates the United States in half, are such population centers as Reno, Nevada; Denver, Colorado; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The southern subspecies was listed as endangered when the first list was compiled in 1967, with the northern subspecies remaining unlisted. However, confusion resulted, since the two populations have overlapping ranges. The current rulemaking resolves this problem by simply listing the entire species, Haliaeetus leucocephalus, as endangered in the lower 48 States except in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Oregon, and Washington where it is listed as threatened.

The listing of the bald eagle as endangered in some States and threatened in others expresses the biological conditions in these respective areas. While the outlook for the species is not bad in every State, and some regions have even experienced encouraging increases, existing populations are believed to be depleted enough to warrant the additional protection of the Endangered Species Act. A provision of this law will help slow further deterioration of this species' critical habitat.

"Civilization has drastically reduced the available habitat for these creatures, and it is precisely this loss of living space that is the major threat to wildlife today," Greenwalt said. "Losses of eagle habitat have been particularly severe in the lower Great Lakes region, New York, and New England.

"In addition, in some areas of the country, the noble bird can't even hatch its own eggs. Pesticide residues have so contaminated its body that egg shells become thin and break when it tries to hatch them. Only a single nesting pair of bald eagles remains in New York State where they used to be common . . . and this pair didn't produce any offspring last year."

Shooting continues to be the leading cause of premature death among adult and immature bald eagles and accounts for 40 to 50 percent of birds picked up by field personnel. Some people misidentify them for other species while hunting, and others deliberately kill them because of an ingrained prejudice against all birds of prey.

There is still much hope for the bald eagle, however. While in the entire lower 48 there are only about 700 active nests, the population in Alaska has an estimated 7,000 to 7,500 nesting pairs. In the upper Great Lakes region and in the Pacific Northwest, eagle populations currently appear to be maintaining themselves. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, working with State game and fish agencies, have for the last 3 years successfully transplanted bald eagle eggs from healthy nests in Wisconsin and Minnesota to nests in Maine where eagles are fatally contaminated with pesticides. The species has also benefited from programs such as captive breeding, monitoring, and other research conducted at State and Federal facilities around the Nation.

"No single organization or governmental action can save a species by itself," said Greenwalt, "because it takes the concerted effort and determination of individuals and governmental agencies at all levels to make a lasting impact. But it has been done--with the Key deer, the American alligator, the bison, and with other species. Fortunately for the bald eagle, we have this support, so I am confident it will survive, too."

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EDITORS: Black and white glossies are available by calling 202/343-8770.

